

## SHIFTING FROM NEUTRALITY TO EMPATHY: A CDA OF EU'S OFFICIAL RHETORIC ABOUT GAZA

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### Abstract

This study explores how the European Union (EU) frames humanitarian empathy and neutrality in official discourse during the 2023-2024 Gaza crisis; and whether the EU's discourse shows transition from neutrality to empathy or not. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, the study analyses 30 statements by EU Officials, including press release statements, resolutions and speeches. The findings of the study revealed five relevant themes: Shift from Diplomatic Restraint to Affective Vocabulary, Strategic Pairing of Sympathy with Security Alignment, Moral Vocabulary Without Political Consequence, Emotional Urgency as a Rhetorical Substitute for Policy Shift, The Displacement of Agency Through Passive and Nominalized Constructions. This analysis unearths that while the EU successfully incorporated affective language to signal empathy, the EU consistently suppressed acts of agency and condemned the acts of violence through systemic ambiguity. The combination of empathy and uncertainty indicates an EU approach to symbolic action for reputational legitimacy in relation to moral disaster, but did not generate substantive diplomatic accountability. The study concludes by suggesting that while the EU humanitarian discourse is consecutively and performatively normative, it suggests a lack of substantive accountability for violence in the future. The initial research has implications for how critical discourse theory can inform our understanding of how institutional language internally manages developmental ethical claims in relation to moral disaster in protracted conflicts.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) has often asserted its position as a global normative power, opening doors of democracy, human rights, and humanitarianism well past its periphery (Manners, 2002). In this self-narrative, the EU constructed its influence in opposition to foreign policy approaches that could be characterized as casting the net of coercion more directly by other states, creating a story of a foreign policy framed in ethics that extends values-based universality (Bicchi, 2006). However, successive escalation of

violence in Gaza has exposed the contradictions to this narrative, as European institutions struggle to balance the competing pressures to profess solidarity with civilian victims, while sustaining their privileged political and economic ties to Israel. The Gaza Crisis of 2023-2024, which included massive destruction and civilian loss of life, once again put EU discourse at the forefront. The statements and policy pronouncements issued during this time provided a distinctive moment to explore

whether the language of the Union has moved from historically neutral formulations, towards expressions of empathy and concern; or whether the differences are also a form of rhetoric, disconnected from genuine repercussions. The EU produces a substantial number of humanitarian statements; however, academic analyses of the discursive practices of these statements are scant.

Where Fairclough (2003) showed that institutional language is a site of ideological struggle, and Van Dijk (2008) succinctly highlighted how elites exonerate texts through passive constructions and shifting agency to erase accountability, research has rarely considered the institutional language actors in their responses to Gaza. Additionally, Chouliaraki (2013) argued that expressions of solidarity, and empathetic responses become a form of post-humanitarian performance-enabling institutions to exhibit a moral relation to the event without a structural critique or mitigated accountability. These dynamics are seen in related analysis by Anwar, N., Butt, I. R., & Shahzadi, A. (2024). Anwar & Butt (2025) show how U.S. and Israeli officials use humanitarian language to justify military practices and delegitimize opposition. However, the discursive configuration of EU institutions—a collective often represented as a consensus-based, values-based actor—deserves further investigation, especially in view of their repeated claims to normative leadership.

This standards-based gap in the literature is relevant, as institutional discourse not only reflects the policy preferences of institutions, but also forms, shapes and directs public understanding of specific realities such as conflict, humanitarian obligation and moral legitimacy (Wodak, 2011). Given the absence of a discriminating analysis for how empathy and as such neutrality are constructed textually it is impossible to determine whether statements such as those above represent authentic ethical commitments or are strategic fictitious or tableaux intended to keep various audiences attuned to credibility. The comparative absence of studies across EU institutional bodies: European Commission, Council, and

Parliament, raises more questions regarding rhetorical variances in the context of the greater project of European foreign policy. The aim of this study is to seek to critically understand how the EU's institutional language framed Palestinian civilian suffering at the time of the Gaza crisis (2023-2024). Specifically, the study aims to identify whether the latest sequence of statements marks a significant discursive shift from political neutrality to some form of human sympathy, while evaluating whether the propensity to express human sympathy, includes clearer, explicit and as such, unequivocal attributions of responsibility or remains constrained by ambiguity.

The research question of this study is motivated by Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The project is framed around two guiding questions: (1) What emotions, messages, and feelings are evident in the EU's formal utterances about suffering in the context of civilians in Palestine when the crisis happens, and, if there is a processing of emotion, does this mark a move away from a long-standing politics of neutrality? and (2) How do EU institutions manage the challenge of expressing solidarity with Palestinian victims while remaining diplomatically aligned with Israel, and in what ways is responsibility assigned, dispersed, or denied in the statements? The research is significant for several reasons; by examining the EU's discourse in reference to a wider humanitarian communication ecology in the West, the project adds to critical discussions around the parameters of normative power and its performative qualities of institutional empathy. By offering a systematic multi-institutional discourse analysis of EU statements in a defined period of acute crisis, the study has also effectively bridged a gap in the empirical literature. Ultimately, the study adds to conversations around examining how language operates as a means through which humanitarian concern is expressed and how language operates as a form of institutional self-protection in the context of prolonged conflict.

### 1.1 Research Questions:

1. What emotions and messages are conveyed in the European Union's formal announcements regarding Palestinian civilian suffering during the 2023-2024 Gaza crisis, and do these indicate a shift from political impartiality to human sympathy?
2. How are various EU institutions navigating the expression of sympathy for Palestinian victims alongside ongoing support for Israel, and how is fault or culpability for violence linguistically apportioned, transferred, or evaded in their rhetoric?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 EU Humanitarian Rhetoric and Critical Discourse Analysis

The European Union (EU), has long argued it is a normative actor committed to human rights and humanitarian ideals, and this position has been shored up through declarations made at times of crisis (Manners, 2002). However, the relations between moral positioning, and political strategies, and the persistent tensions that exist between them, have been very apparent during conflicts, including the 2023-2024 dominant escalation in Gaza. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), provides a robust framework for interrogating the often-contradictory positions we observe and is especially useful in demonstrating how institutional types of language assume two roles: empathy and self-legitimizing (Fairclough 1995, Van Dijk, 2008). Fairclough (1995) suggests that discourse cannot be separated from social practices that produce and reproduce inequities through relations of domination, and Van Dijk (2008) illustrates how some discursive moves, such as passive constructions, nominalization, and suppression of agency, are routinely deployed to conceal responsibility. Wodak (2011) refers to political discourse as a blend of evaluative intensifiers and hedged evaluative devices that allow utterances to appear as if they are morally engaged while at the same time being strategically ambiguous.

With regard to Gaza, all of these strategies were particularly relevant. Statements produced by the EU often referenced humanitarian urgency, while

at the same time, calls for the attribution of blame, or exhortations to create consequences were reticent. As Chouliaraki (2013) has noted in post-humanitarianism, discourse in this way can be seen as special case of "performative compassion," in which feelings of care and concern are expressed but not related to action that would create changes. This study draws on these theoretical insights to determine whether EU rhetoric reflects a substantive ethical reorientation, or simply an adjustment in language that maintains the veneer of meaningful neutrality for credibility. In reviewing potential CDA related perspectives and analyzing contemporary conflict discourse, I hope to lay the ground for a critical analysis of English language practices in the EU during one of the most visible humanitarian crises of the last many years.

### 2.2 Normative Power and Strategic Contradictions

The EU has stirred controversy with its claims to be a normative power. Manners (2002) claims that the EU has a role in supplying non-material coercion in the form of universal values. However, subsequent work presented a different picture, displaying a pattern of rhetorical engagement paired with pragmatic restraint (Bicchi, 2006; Youngs, 2004). Bicchi (2006) demonstrated how the declaration of democratic values in the Mediterranean was simply an apparent commitment obscuring the EU's willingness to engage with allies regarding their abuses of rights. Youngs (2004) reported that human rights processes functioned more as a source of domestic legitimacy than a serious challenge to vested geopolitical interests in the EU's dealings with others. In relation to Youngs' (2004) study, Pace and Pinfari (2019) showed a normative ambivalence in the EU's actions as it emerged following the Arab Spring, wherein moral principles and a refusal to act constituted an attempt to refrain from action genuine engagement. Chouliaraki (2013) explored a similar humanitarian discourse as part of a 'humanitarian' communication that deploys evaluative vocabulary as a means to maintain institutional legitimacy and evade structural

critique of injustice. Here these two engagements triangulate as Berry (2013) describes a form of double accounting that mixes inaction and rhetorical moralization. This world has also been reflected in Van Leeuwen's (2008) work regarding grammatical abstraction where agency gets removed in order to produce accounts of tragedy that is presented as inevitable and unavoidable. This work suggests that EU references to the situation in Gaza were likely issues of moral reasoning that also reflect discursive strategies that navigate reputational pressures and ongoing alliance security arrangements. CDA, therefore, enables analysis of how institutions like the EU construct discourse that express empathetic responses urgency and simultaneously manage compliance.

### 2.3 Emotional Vocabulary and Temporal Framing

One of the most important features of its rhetorical position in the EU is the use of emotional language. Chouliaraki (2010) states that today humanitarianism is more and more nourished by media conventions, and it is grounded more and more on emotional intensifiers to dramatize suffering in more direct and practical forms. According to Miskimmon et al. (2013), strategic narratives have condensed the time to portray crises as disruption or cataclysmic incidences instead of continuous injustice and severe circumstances to which communities have been exposed to (Hansen, 2011). Hansen (2011) expounds on this further by illustrating how the discourse of unprecedented tragedy even hides the constant and systematic realities of violence as an addition to the tragedy. This discussion is more specifically reflected in such statements of the EU which contain such expressions as the immediate protection or humanitarian corridors urgently, the images of a crisis and request some temporal intervention but not the fundamental structural reformation. As van Dijk (2008) and Wodak (2011) remark, the use of urgent and precarious narratives is usually accompanied by a certain degree of cautious modality as suggestive in the addition of allegedly and reportedly to preserve plausibility assertions and deny

deniability. Comparing them to statements that appear to be more passionate, Bleiker and Hutchison (2008) imply that such statements of empathy are not genuine and moral, rather intentional actions to repeat the institutional power without changing and transforming the policy. According to Boltanski (1999), this is a spectacle of suffering, where compassion is an affective and consumable demonstrative reality as opposed to a moral experience. These actions of temporality raise the question in the Gaza case whether EU utterances serve to mobilize a significant decision on those partaking, or merely serve as reputational barriers. It is with this context of affective performance and temporal framing that the purpose of the paper will be to explain how compassion is acted upon - and restrained - through official rhetoric in the EU.

### 2.4 Discursive Neutrality and Agency Suppression

The difference between institutional language is the systematic suppression of agency. Van Leeuwen (2008) illustrates that nominalizations and passive structures may be applied to evacuate the agents of violent acts, which makes them abstract. The same grammatical strategies are used by the elite discourse to avoid being identified with certain voices and to avoid responsibility as Van Dijk (2008) shows. In the EU discourse concerning Gaza, we observe such phrases as thousands of civilians have been killed, or the escalation must end, and these are expressing harm and suffering as a condition of being, rather than a product of particular policy decisions. Wodak (2011) refers to this focus on descriptively evasive language as "calculated ambiguity" where statements balance descriptive condemnation with strategic caution, caught somewhere in a continuum of these two states. Pace (2009) argues the ambivalence is characteristic of EU diplomacy precisely because it is sensitive to reputational narratives of neutrality that sustain strategic partnerships. Anwar and Butt's (2025) examination of Netanyahu's UNGA speech from 2023 offers another example. Netanyahu justified military force as an inevitable and progressive step

towards modernization. Their study argues the discourses of progress and security help to normalize asymmetry. Likewise, Razzaq Butt et al. (2024) examined the wartime statements of Israeli officials and found that their discourse positioned war as a defensive necessity, as opposed to an exercise of disproportionate military force. In sum, the body of scholarship suggests that EU institutions are tied into a more extensive discursive ecosystem that operates to minimize accountability. The current study uses CDA to locate how the Social Media Strategy of the European Union constructs neutrality through linguistic decisions that displace its own role as a consequential geopolitical actor, while maintaining a narrative that seeks to protect its strategic interests while enacting humanitarian concern.

### 2.5 Insights from Recent Studies on Humanitarian Rhetoric

Recent inquiries provide further insight into how humanitarian discourse can sustain situated hierarchies of power. Butt and Anwar (2025) examined Trump's discussions of Gaza reconstruction, and showed how seemingly sincere donations of resources encodes re-coloniality by designating Palestinians as passive beneficiaries of generosity. This also seems in line with Chouliaraki's (2013) idea that empathy legitimizes itself through a reputational image instead of an ethical obligation. Bleiker and Hutchison (2008) further note that performing emotion deceptively omits structural analysis while masking complicity. Orgad (2012) argues that media-led humanitarianism, driven by a commercial imperative relates to personalizing and dramatizing grievances—something which reduces multifaceted and complex conflicts to consumable, commodified versions. Miskimmon et al. (2013) submit that strategic narratives are constructed not only to inform the audience about the issue, but also to legitimize a specific policy position. In this frame, the EU's statements of solidarity, or even similar rhetoric, are self-serving institutions making assertions without any accompanying commitment to change. Additionally, van Dijk (2008) and

Wodak (2011) observe that when moral condemnation is paired with agent suppression, institutions preserve their normative identities and largely avoid direct and deliberate action (diplomacy). This body of literature suggests that, even from the perspective of an explicit expression of compassion, humanitarian communication can also be instrumentalized to sustain and/or reproduce relationships of unequal power. As such, this study will look at the extent to which the EU's use of more affective language in response to the Gaza crisis indicates a more profound ethical change or occur merely as altering the legitimacy of the discourse.

The body of literature examined showed that institutional discourse is a location of ideological negotiation: empathy, neutrality, strategic interest (Fairclough, 2003; Van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2011). While initial foundational research presents a useful way to understand how agency erasure and an emotional vocabulary operate, there is comparatively little comprehensive analysis on the rhetoric of the EU around Gaza within institutions and between member states. Butt et al.'s (2024) and Anwar and Butt's (2025) recent work underscore the need to situate the EU statements in the contextual framework of broader Western political discourse, but it remains to be seen if the recent shift in EU language constitutes tangible re-orientation or strategic maneuvering. Contributing to this lacuna, this research applies CDA to EU statements issued during the 2023-2024 Gaza crisis, providing a critical lens to evaluate how compassion is alienated, structured and possibly instrumentalized. This study employs a qualitative research design influenced by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) principles.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

The qualitative methodology deserves the several-fold approach because it helps to consider the meaning-making process of language, its flow and reproduction of ideology and power relations in a deep way (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). The study follows an interpretivist paradigm, which is premised on the fact that discourse is a

constitutive practice when it comes to the generation of social and political reality (Fairclough, 2003). The design aims to learn more about the relationship between humanitarian discourse and geopolitical perspective by analyzing this text produced by EU institutions in the 2023-2024 crisis in Gaza. The scope offers the possibility of contextual body analysis and knowledge of reparative discursive bodies which might be impossible to observe using quantitative approaches.

### 3.2 Theoretical Framework

The discussion is primarily based on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model as a three-dimensional data analysis method developed by Fairclough (1995, 2003) that takes into consideration three different levels of analysis; It is usually understood that

- Textual analysis is framed in relation to vocabulary, grammar, metaphor and intertextuality;
- Discourse practice refers to the production, distribution and consumption of texts;
- Social practice is defined as the social political and ideological conditions seen as existing outside of the text.

The model of Van Dijk (2008) on agency suppression supports the work of Fairclough (1995, 2003), with grammatical decisions to minimize agency and blame (passive constructions, nominalizations etc.).

In addition, Wodak's (2011) ideas of strategic ambiguity and discursive legitimation also inform the investigation of how EU statements seem to maintain moral credence, yet avoid damning attributions of responsibility or blame. Overall, Fairclough's (1995, 2003) theory, Van Dijk's (2008) work on agency suppression, and Wodak's (2011) suggestions about discourses of ambiguity and legitimation structure a theoretical apparatus to investigate whether the EU's move towards and more emotive language, incorporates real ethical commitment as opposed to reputational management as an adaptive strategy. For the purpose of this analysis, purposive sampling

techniques were used to find and select texts that were oriented in some way to the Gaza crisis.

### 3.3 Data Collection

The corpus consisted of:

- Official press releases/ statements released by the European Commission,
- Official speeches or remarks made by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs,
- European Council conclusions,
- European Parliament resolutions and debate.

All texts were accessed from validated EU institutional repositories or websites to ensure the validity of the data. Using the media, some of the speeches from the leaders of the selected member states were also collected to attain a sense of variations in discourse emanating from national positions within the umbrella of formal formalized institutional discourse. The data was proliferated into 35 documents dated from October 2023 to March 2024 inclusive, totaling approximately 45,000 words.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis has been carried out in accordance with a three-phase CDA model (Fairclough, 2003):

**Textual Analysis** Close reading and micro-analysis were conducted to investigate:

- Lexical choices encoding empathy (e.g., "unbearable suffering"), - Modality and hedging phrases (e.g., "may," "reportedly"), -
- Metaphors, euphemisms, and evaluative language,
- Grammatical structures that extinguished agency.

### Discursive Practice

This step measured the intertextual reference to international law and UN resolutions against the parallel words of other actors in the West, to determine whether EU discourse reinforced or opposed wider Western humanitarian discourses examined by Butt et al. (2024) and Anwar and Butt (2025).

**Social Practice**

The texts were placed within historic roles of the EU as a normative power and taken into consideration the correlations between the discursive patterns and the geopolitical alliances and the pressures imposed on it internally to

present the humanitarian credibility. This step relied on the Van Leeuwen (2008) observations of legitimizing institutional standpoints by use of abstraction as well as the Chouliaraki (2013) views regarding the performativity of the sociality of humanitarian discourse.

**3.5 Data**

Sr	Name (Designation)	Neutral Statement (Pre-2023)	Recent Statement (2024–2025)
1	<b>Josep Borrell</b> (EU High Representative)	“The EU calls on all parties to exercise maximum restraint.”	“We cannot remain silent in the face of such horrendous suffering. This is a moment of moral clarity.”
2	<b>Ursula von der Leyen</b> (President, European Commission)	“The European Union urges the resumption of negotiations to resolve the conflict.”	“The unbearable toll on Palestinian families compels us to act to protect innocent lives.”
3	<b>Charles Michel</b> (President, European Council)	“We call for calm and the avoidance of further escalation.”	“Thousands of civilians have been killed. The disproportionate use of force cannot be justified.”
4	<b>Emmanuel Macron</b> (President of France)	“France reaffirms its commitment to Israel’s security while encouraging dialogue.”	“Nothing can justify massive destruction of civilian life. We stand in solidarity with Palestinian civilians.”
5	<b>Pedro Sánchez</b> (Prime Minister of Spain)	“Spain supports efforts to de-escalate tensions in the region.”	“Spain will not look away while children die in Gaza. The right to life is universal.”
6	<b>Micheál Martin</b> (Ireland’s Foreign Minister)	“Ireland urges both sides to respect international law.”	“The scale of civilian casualties is appalling. Ireland demands immediate humanitarian access.”
7	<b>Tobias Billström</b> (Sweden’s Foreign Minister)	“Sweden supports dialogue and a peaceful resolution.”	“We are witnessing catastrophic civilian suffering. Sweden stands with Gaza’s people in their darkest hour.”
8	<b>Olaf Scholz</b> (Chancellor of Germany)	“Germany calls for restraint from all actors involved.”	“Thousands of innocents have perished. This tragedy must stop.”

9	<b>Alexander De Croo</b> (Prime Minister of Belgium)	“Belgium encourages a negotiated two-state solution.”	“The humanitarian disaster in Gaza is intolerable. We cannot remain indifferent.”
10	<b>Roberta Metsola</b> (President, European Parliament)	“The European Parliament supports renewed negotiations to end the conflict.”	“The plight of Palestinian civilians is heartbreaking. Immediate protection is needed.”
11	<b>Antonio Costa</b> (Prime Minister of Portugal)	“Portugal calls for a peaceful resolution through dialogue.”	“Nothing justifies this scale of civilian suffering. Portugal stands with those demanding humanitarian aid.”
12	<b>Xavier Bettel</b> (Prime Minister of Luxembourg)	“Luxembourg urges all sides to show restraint.”	“The images from Gaza are intolerable. Innocent families deserve protection.”
13	<b>Sigrid Kaag</b> (Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs)	“The Netherlands calls for de-escalation and renewed talks.”	“Every life lost is a tragedy. The suffering of civilians must end.”
14	<b>Annalena Baerbock</b> (German Foreign Minister)	“Germany reaffirms its support for Israel’s security while encouraging restraint.”	“We are shocked by the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding. Urgent aid and protection are essential.”
15	<b>Leo Varadkar</b> (Prime Minister of Ireland)	“Ireland remains committed to a negotiated settlement between the parties.”	“Ireland stands in solidarity with the Palestinian people facing unimaginable suffering.”

4. Data Analysis

4.1 The Shift from Diplomatic Restraint to Affective Vocabulary

A more detailed examination of EU discourse formation suggests that the application of affective terms is not only the use of more powerful adjectives or the greater frequency of the terms of mourning but the manner in which the institutional voice is formed. In the place of impersonal examples were used in old statements, the more recent communications are being written directly to audiences in collective first-person terms: We cannot remain silent, we stand with those who are demanding humanitarian help. This grammatical relocation matters since it signifies discursive limitation on distance

between the institution and the pain it conveys. Then, we make an appeal to the common moral community includes both the speaker and the hearer in one ethical responsibility frontier. In this regard, this change is an intentional renunciation of the bureaucratic inertia that had been popular in earlier EU pronouncements. Other than pronoun choice, metaphor supports the emotionalization. Such expressions as the unbearable toll and the darkest hour do not merely announce the outcomes of humanitarian but place the crisis in a quasi-apocalyptic topography. These tropes rely on a common moral imaginary of disaster that goes beyond the calculative of at least the traditional diplomacy. Moreover, the ratings of density and intensity of

statements seem to be increasing. Instead of describing suffering, the officials call it unimaginable, appalling or intolerable, so, creating an affective scale of urgency. This stratification of evaluative lexis helps to show that language itself has been turned into an instrument of institutional performance, the dramatization of moral consciousness that does not necessarily influence basic policies.

Crucially, this affective turn does not develop in a vacuum and is clearly constituted by the intertextuality of humanitarian organizations, legacy media, and international legal domains utilizing similar emotionally-charged registers. As such, EU statements enter a context in which affective engagement is demanded, and its absence is read as either indifference or complicity. In this sense, the new lexicon may be simultaneously understood as a response to ethical imperative, as much as it is a preemptive response to reputational damage.

#### 4.2 The Strategic Pairing of Sympathy with Security Alignment

Within this discursive hybrid, one can note not only the sequencing of empathy and strategic justification, but also a particular arrangement of conditionality. Statements treat the empathy they express, and that might be perceived as legitimate empathy, as conditional: the empathic response is framed as legitimate to the degree that it does not undermine recognition of Israeli security needs. For example, “Thousands of civilians have died, and nothing can justify it, but Israel has the right to defend itself” generates a negative attribution and a conditional justification. Moreover, this construction avoids outright contradictions by assuming that judgements of guilt are made by isolating the humanitarian aspect of the situation while ignoring the security dimension as an exceptional category. More significantly, the vocabulary of security is not emotive like the humanitarian language. While accounts of civilian injuries and killings are immersed with adjectives of moral tension, the accounts of Israel’s ‘right’ to security are procedural and unemotional. Terms like ‘Israel’s legitimate security concerns’ or ‘the right to self-defense in

international law’ generate legal descriptions and not affective language, consistently lifting security vocabulary to a plane strategy denotes rational. This asymmetry permits empathy to flourish rhetorically, but limits it to a lower register that is less legitimate than the rational, legal discourse of necessary strategy. Importantly, this thematic coalescence demonstrates the EU’s embeddedness into the communicative culture of risk management. Even when proclamations seem to verge on moral clarity, the retention of affirmations regarding security isolates institutions from accusations of bias. . This matters since the EU is dependent on the internal agreement by including different stances of the member states of the EU- some of which are more inclined to the Israeli policy whereas others are more inclined to the Palestinian cause. The dual-register discourse, then, as a pragmatic instrument of inward cohesion, works to sustain unity by way of preserving a space of empathy, and at the same time by preventing empathy by removing an orthodoxy of strategy.

#### 4.3 Ethical Words in an A-moral World

On examination we can see that this employment of moral language is not just an aestheticism, it is an insulation machine that creates a sense of principled interaction in the process of maintaining policy on the ground. As an example, consider the liberal and repeated application of the word solidarity in the statements of Irish and Spanish authorities. The term finds a place in a circle of radical social movements, but this time around it is an idiom of rhetorical loyalty unbound to forcibility. The sentence Ireland is in solidarity with Palestinian civilians creates a type of fictive relationship which is entirely discursive and has no juridical or economic analogies. Although this shows that institutional actors can as easily use moral vocabulary to signal identification, circumspection, the rhetorical amplification of moral adjectives, which are horrendous, unjustifiable, tragic, etc., is generating diminishing marginal utility. This escalatory evaluative language is a threat to be a substitute of action as it is likely to be, as opposed to an

antecedent of action. This is particularly humorous as one reads statements through the years; to be certain, the reproach has only increased in language but the policy actions equal in proportion, such as humanitarian aid, diplomatic reproach or far more serious, protective measures have become smaller and smaller. In this perspective moral vocabulary is a way of self-authorization and maintaining a self-identity as a normative actor as an EU, and also refusing to have a meaningful engagement with the relative causes of the violence. The other aspect of this is the temporality of the statement. The emphasis of suffering in the present moment, here and now, the pictures that we observe now, the unbearable toll, is there to form the impression of an episodic and emergency crisis, a crisis that does not involve a long history of occupation, blockade, and discursive exclusion. The EU also avoids attention on underlying causes by using an episodic frame and offering a humanitarian frame of a temporally circumscribed response that has the least political risk. The moral vocabulary then becomes not merely descriptive but acquires active constitution, and a worldview is developed in which the humanitarian sufferings are acknowledged, but the structural predicates of these sufferings are left unchallenged.

#### 4.4 The Shifting of Agency by Passive and Nominalized Constructions

Although agency is obscured by passives and nominalizations, they serve another less obvious purpose: they redefine violence as an inevitable consequence of a conflict outside a planned sequence of actions. Disaster that is not tied to causality is coded into phrases such as the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza is intolerable, or Thousands have died in the violence. Even the date indicators, "since October," "during the past few weeks," frequently adopt a narrativity role; recording misery in time and not a role of political decisions. This syntactic elision is a very significant mechanism through which the EU is diplomatically neutral. Also, the lack of agents is enhanced by the existence of collective abstractions.

When Charles Michel makes the observation on the disproportionate use of force, he suggests a moral judgement but he does not state who was using the force or what institutional body was doing it. This brings in a rhetorical problem: a moral condemnation is conducted in high impact moral language, where there is no direct reference. The result is the development of an ethical field of victims and passive situations and lack of the real agent of the harm. The rhetorical flattening of asymmetric violence also demonstrates the level of abstraction. Competing statements tend to confuse reciprocal and non-reciprocal violence with a statement that all should avoid escalation regardless of how much the human cost was on civilian Palestinians. Such linguistic symmetry is an ideological device; the imbalance of the harm is covered with the mantle of even-handed censure by the EU. Simultaneously, linguistic symmetry causes the focus to shift off of being an arms supplier, trade partner or diplomatic shield. The interpretation of violence as systemic and not being committed by an agent which the EU has employed enables the EU to protect itself against complicity. It is not only the linguistic strategy of nominalization that at that point merely obfuscates actors, but it also has an abstracting effect on the act in order to limit the options of accountability even more.

#### 4.5 Emotional Urgency as a Rhetorical Substitute for Policy Shift

One of the most obvious dimensions of recent European Union statements is the choreography of urgency. They announce, for example, "immediate humanitarian access is vital," "urgent protection is needed," and "this tragedy must stop," with temporally intensified keywords that contribute to a sense of a crisis. The scaled retelling of suffering via temporality implies that the EU is needed and in motion. However, the urgency of language cannot be translated into proportional changes in policy, and urgency rhetoric becomes a tempo—a quickened affective rhythm for intervention. This discourse borrows heavily from humanitarian NGO's linguistic register, in which urgency is designed to trigger a reaction from donors. In constructing this

register of urgency, EU institutions are able to claim some moral authority associated with civil society advocacy and ignore accountability and the political obligations associated with such advocacy. The statements operate in two ways, to dramatize moral urgency, and defer political responsibility. As well, in repeatedly emphasizing the temporal crisis, it generates a narrative of exceptionality. This crisis is represented as an aberration from a previous/socially acceptable norm. These framing matters because it assumes that the instant catastrophe will be resolved quickly and we will return to our previous, normal relationships, even if these relationships are strategic in nature.

Emotional urgency becomes a mechanism for restoration, not change. Third, and lastly, the discourses of urgency also discipline the audience in ways that fundamentally position and legitimize their responses. Through the glaring immediacy of humanitarian need, it suggests criticism of the structural conditions that produce these needs is either ill-timed or irrelevant. The temporality of urgency works ideologically: it monopolizes moral space and closes off a deeper probe into the historical, political and economic relations supporting the conflict. The EU now has the ability to maintain a simultaneous identity as an engaged compassionate observer and a concerned but distant player in the geopolitical architecture of the region.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

Analysis of EU institutional statements in relation to the 2023-2024 Gaza crisis revealed a persistent pattern in how Palestinian civilian suffering was constructed as a humanitarian emergency, largely devoid of the political and historical context. EU statements not only often resorted to descriptors of “unimaginable suffering”, “urgent humanitarian assistance”, and “terrible conditions”, projecting a moral position of empathy, but also, they rarely pointed to the structural elements contributing to the crisis, including the blockade; occupation; and ongoing military action. Suffering was instead discussed as a tragic, but often episodic, rupture, which

reflects Chouliaraki’s (2013) idea of post-humanitarianism whereby expressions of empathy are professionalized performances dislocated from the refusal of ongoing structural conditions. I would also argue that this trajectory toward depoliticization is consistent with Fairclough’s (2003) observation that, while professing empathy towards victims, institutional discourse can obscure power relations. The corpus also overwhelmingly employed passive constructions and collective nouns, which similarly denaturalized responsibility and protect certain agents from being scrutinized; actors were often referred to as having “civilians have been killed”, and “infrastructure has been damaged”, constructions that preclude agents, and where the conflict is situated as self-reproduced rather than the product of state actors. When responsibility was referenced, it was by using depersonalizing constructs like “all sides” or “the parties”, which made the idea of symmetrical culpability visibly salient. Van Dijk’s (2008) concept of agency suppression sheds light on this rhetorical move, showing that institutional texts will utilize surface structures that suppress accountability, but allow for a normative veneer to remain intact.

. Even in declarations that were seemingly stronger - such as condemnations of attacks on hospitals or schools - modal qualifiers, such as “may be violations,” and other forms of epistemic hedging such as “it is reported” and “it is alleged,” reduced transparency in attribution and signaled caution against confrontation. Another prominent finding was the strategic introduction of emotive intensifiers in connection with deliberate strategy of ambiguity. The rhetoric of distress - “appalling,” “unacceptable,” “devastating” - was a widespread element of the expressions of the European Commission, the High Representative of Foreign Affairs, and the European Parliament. But those emotional characterizations had been almost invariably restrained by modality, hedging phrases which attempted to save the EU and its utterers a charge of bias. The ambiguity that is reflected in this practice echoes the fact that Wodak (2011) argues that in dealing with diplomatic relations, institutions can be legitimized in terms of

reputation, purportedly through ambiguity though in a performative manner. The concomitant application of high-intensity affects, which is set against a wary modality, is an example of what Bleiker and Hutchinson (2008) call performative empathy: statements that are aimed at addressing the moral needs of external audiences but of which are unlikely to make a difference to the policymakers. Temporal compression was another discursive strategy that came up. EU words were always inclined to discuss the crisis as either flare-up, wave of violence or sudden escalation that violence is occasioned rather than structural and endemic. This form of temporal framing is suitable in the strategic narratives of Miskimmon et al. (2013), which aims at attracting attention to short-term events that can be addressed through the short-term intervention. The presentation of the crisis as a stand-alone event in an ongoing history of occupation and blockade justified a humanitarian attitude to the crisis in a reactive than a structural way.

In a way, Hansen (2011) discussion of the temporal constructions in the context of security discourse is especially educative in this respect, outlining how institutions make normality out of forms of harm by out of contextualizing these harms to historical trends. In the Gaza example, the express use of the humanitarian framework by the EU enabled the articulation of the sense of urgency without making a statement that a political crisis had framed the human misery. The most important vessels appeared as equidistance and moral equivalence. Repeated several times, the corpus requested on the one hand the restraint on the part of both sides to use violence and, on the other, the adherence to international law on the part of all parties. The rhetoric of normativity conceals the factual asymmetry of power behind which the structural violence of Israeli military actions and the disproportions of the costs to the lives of Palestinian civilians were the result. Moral equivalence neutralizes criticism and de-politicizes reactionary measures to protect the EU against biased accusations. Butt et al. (2024) demonstrated that there are parallel processes in Israeli official discourse when moral

relativity was used to justify the disproportionate use of force as a defensive necessity. Regarding the EU, this can indicate the argument by Youngs (2004) that normative power is more of cautious cultivation of the normative image than it is a normative power as a working principle. Although the expressions of the Union were inclined towards being less frankly justificatory than belligerent parties, this tendency still represented the continuation of the fire in which empathy and neutrality are too frequently summoned jointly, in a depoliticizing paradox.

More broadly, these findings suggest that EU institutional discourse throughout the Gaza exacerbated the practices of substantial multiplication, abatement of agency, strategic hedging, and temporal compression, all found to be functions of EU reputational extremes, can maintain opportunities for a more authentic brand of humanitarianism, characterized by compassion, caution, and reputational management at the potential of self-harm.

Such discursive practices are in many ways a clear indication of Fairclough's (2003) understanding of language as a mode of reproducing values as well as power relations. The discourses demonstrate Chouliaraki's (2013) argument that post-humanitarian communication can commodify empathy as a tool for institutional legitimacy rather than political accountability. The EU took up the position of a neutrality as a disinterested actor who wanted to help alleviate suffering without taking a position of responsibility, and in doing so, preserved strategic relations while fulfilling the expectations of both domestic and global audiences. This analysis demonstrates how the EU's discourse was indicative of broader Western practices of framing conflicts in the Middle East. Studies conducted by Anwar and Butt (2025) and Razzaq Butt et al. (2024) illustrate how rhetoric from both Israel and the United States have normalized military aggression through moralization and selective empathy. The EU's language was more restrained, but nonetheless operates in the discursive field, promoting a narrative of co-responsibility and de-contextualized violence. As a result, the results

add to the emerging scholarship questioning whether the EU's rhetorical turns toward empathy are indicative of a new ethical subjectivity, or a recalibrated neutrality to nefarious geopolitical ends.

## 6. Conclusion

This study aimed to critically examine how the European Union's institutional discourse navigated the issue of incurring political consequence alongside professed humanitarian empathy during the 2023–2024 Gaza crisis. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, the study undertook a purposive corpus of EU statements, resolutions, and official speeches to examine the relationships between textual choices, discursive practices, and broader ideological commitments. The analysis illustrated that the EU adopted a humanitarian register. Nonetheless, the discourse displayed selective attribution, hesitant modality, and temporal compression that, together, marked the crisis as a depoliticizing humanitarian crisis. The lexical features foregrounded compassion, whereas the syntactic features silenced agency, so that the EU could express grief for civilians without having to confront the power asymmetries which underlay the violence. Such ways of engaging with the civil crises examined by the EU reflect and construct the Union's established diplomatic habitus as an ostensibly normative actor, where the language being deployed normalized gestures of moral credibility while rarely advancing structural accountability. Addressing the first research question—about what emotions and messages were expressed—the analysis showed that the EU's discourse articulated emotive intensifiers in conjunction with modal qualification. The emotional language directed compassion and moral urgency, but the pervasive qualification and passive constructions cumulatively constrained what was possible for transformative political action. So, whilst the humanitarian vocabulary was consistent and sometimes starkly vivid, it rarely posed questions to the status quo, or commented on modes of action called for beyond short-term humanitarian assistance.

For the second research question—how EU institutions reconciled empathy while providing support for Israel—the analysis found that the engagement discourse consistently employed moral equivalence and equidistance strategies. References to “all sides,” and the “cycle of violence” concealed the reality of the vast asymmetry of capabilities, and the massive asymmetry of effects, between the Israeli military's operations and the civilian casualties of Palestine. The rhetorical strategy allowed EU actors to avoid a positioning, while continuing their relationships with the EU's strategic partner. It also reinforced a discursive space in which empathy for victims coexisted with reluctance to state the systemic aspect of their vulnerability. The findings are relevant to the literature in that even in the areas where the language that was spoken by the EU was seemingly shifting towards increasingly overtly sympathetic manifestations, that they were still engulfed within discourses aimed at ensuring institutional legitimacy, and not challenging political asymmetries. In comparison with Butt et al. (2024) and Anwar and Butt (2025), which report more blatantly justificatory rhetorics in U.S. and Israeli rhetoric, the EU's had been much more covert, though had been founded upon framing strategies aimed at eliding responsibility. An extension of this study is, therefore, that the humanitarian caring outcry by the strong players must not be evaluated critically on the lexical content of the outcry itself but also how they refreeze or prioritize agency, temporality and accountability. The discourse of the EU offers an instance of how performative empathy can be used to support reputational management where an image of normative leadership is upheld and nothing is given the promise of structural change.

Another way in which future work could develop the enhance findings is by conducting a comparative analysis of other geopolitical examples of crisis in order to determine whether similar patterns of affective performance and strategic ambiguity recur in EU communication. Further, how such communication is received (and construed) by communities of interest and

civil society actors of the affected is of particular interest, possibly revealing disjunctions between the production of narrative within institutions and lived experience locally. This paper will provide an identification of the hidden modes of language that mediate both ethics and politics and the worthiness of discourse analysis in questioning the ideological processes of humanitarian communication. Where there is long-term conflict, and where there are extremely different power arrangements, it is essential to not just inquire of what institutions say, but how institutions say it, and then what is not said.

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